

# Alexander Calder

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*Contemporary Authors Online*, 2003

**Born:** July 22, 1898 in Pennsylvania, United States, Philadelphia

**Died:** November 11, 1976 in New York, New York, United States

**Nationality:** American

## WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

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- *Calder's Circus*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1964.
- *Calder: An Autobiography with Pictures*, Pantheon (New York City), 1966.

### ILLUSTRATOR

- Charles Leidl, *Animal Sketching*, Sterling Publishers, 1926.
- Aesop, *Fables of Aesop*, Dover Publishing, 1931.
- *A Bestiary*, compiled by Richard Wilbur, Pantheon Books (New York, NY), 1993.

Also illustrator of *3 Young Rats and Other Rhymes*, edited by James Johnson Sweeney, 1944; *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1946; *Selected Fables*, by Jean de La Fontaine, 1948; *A Bestiary*, edited by Richard Wilbur, 1955; *Fetes*, by Jacques Prevert, 1955; *La Proue de la Table*, by Yves Elleouet, 1967; and *Santa Claus*, by D. John Grossman, 1974.

Draftsman and engineer at logging camps, 1919-23; studied drawing and painting under Boardman Robinson at Art Students League, 1923-25, and at the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere, Paris, France, 1926-27; contributed sketches to *National Police Gazette*, New York City, 1925-26; worked on wood sculpture, and produced miniature circus, Paris, 1925-26; member of Abstraction-Creation group, Paris, 1930-31; first mobiles, 1931; lived in Roxbury, CT, after 1933, and spent much time in Siche, near Tours, France, after 1960; set designer for Martha Graham ballets, and for *Socrate* by Erik Satie, 1935, *Provocation* by Pierre Halet, 1963, *Metaboles*, 1969, and *Eppur si muove* by Francis Miroglio, 1971; Calder's own ballet *Work in Progress*, produced in Rome, 1968.

Collections of Calder's work are located in Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany; Art Moderne, Paris, France; Museum of Modern Art, New York City; Whitney Museum, New York City; Guggenheim Museum, New York City; and in Stockholm, Sweden, Philadelphia, PA, and Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

### PERIODICALS

- *Newsweek*, November 22, 1976, p. 79.
- *New York Times*, November 12, 1976; November 13, 1976.
- *Smithsonian*, December, 1976, pp. 74-81.
- *Time*, November 22, 1976, pp. 63-64.\*

Gold Medal, American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1971; Grand Prix National from the French Ministry of Culture, 1974.

Family: Born July 22, 1898, in Philadelphia, PA; died November 11, 1976, in New York, NY; son of Alexander Milne (a sculptor) and Nanette (a painter; maiden name, Lederer) Calder; married Louisa James, 1931; children: two daughters. Education: Attended school in Berkeley, CA; Stevens Institute of Technology (Hoboken, NJ), M.E., 1918.

### "Sidelights"

Best known as the inventor of the mobile, Alexander Calder is considered the preeminent American sculptor of the twentieth century. Calder was fascinated by motion, which led him to develop a new art form--movable sculpture. By adding movable parts to his wire and sheet metal constructions, he gave them a life of their own, allowing them to endlessly rearrange themselves in an ever-changing pattern. Later in his career, he also created looming, standing constructions of intersecting planes of steel plate which he called stabiles. In *Artists: From Michelangelo to Maya Lin*, G. Aimee Ergas quotes a friend and critic of Calder who noted, "Public sculpture was a stuffed shirt's paradise until [he] came along." Calder felt the same way, and he once stated, "Above all, I feel art should be happy and not lugubrious."

Calder was born in 1898 to a family of artists. His mother, Nanette Lederer Calder, was an accomplished painter. His father, Alexander Milne Calder, was a prominent sculptor who carved a notable statue of George Washington on the monumental arch in Manhattan's Washington Square. Alexander Stirling Calder, his grandfather, was also a well-known sculptor; born in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1846, he created the thirty-seven-foot-high bronze effigy of William Penn that still stands on top of Philadelphia's City Hall. When he was a boy, Calder began making toys, jewelry, and gadgets from materials that he found around the house. Although he loved art, it was not Calder's first career choice.

After graduating from high school, Calder decided to become an engineer, and he attended Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. He was an excellent and popular student, and many classmates remembered his pleasant nature and ability to make them laugh. At Stevens, Calder studied mechanical drawing, applied kinetics (the branch of science that deals with the effects of forces on the motions of bodies or with changes in a physical or chemical system), and descriptive geometry. This latter area of study would later prove useful to Calder as an artist.

After graduating from college, Calder worked at various jobs, including automotive engineer, map maker, machinery salesman, efficiency engineer, and crew member in the boiler room of a passenger ship. In 1923 he began to study at the Art Student's League in New York City.

Calder's first art position was as a sports illustrator for the *National Police Gazette*. Because he had a press pass, he was able to spend two weeks in the spring of 1925 sketching scenes at the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus. He also decorated a sporting goods store in New York City with portraits of athletes, and compiled a collection of drawings he had done at New York zoos in his first book, *Animal Sketching*, which was published in 1926. In that same year Calder left New York for Paris.

In Paris Calder enrolled in art classes and began building his first movable wood and wire sculptures in his tiny studio. The result was his famous miniature circus, whose characters are based on his New York circus drawings. Using wood, wire, rubber, cork, buttons, bottle caps, and fabric, Calder created miniature elephants, acrobats, seals, lions, and a ringmaster. Soon, Calder's circus was drawing an audience, and even important artists of the day came to watch as the "funny" American played with his "toys." The circus helped Calder to pay his bills, and it also gave him the opportunity to become known to the leaders in the Paris art community. The impact that the circus had on the intellectual and social circles in Paris was best indicated by the fact that years later Thomas Wolfe, in his novel *You Can't Go Home Again*, would describe one of the performances, his

stinging comments lashing out at the social milieu that treated art as a diversion. Calder's first show in Paris was at the Salon des Humoristes in 1927, where he exhibited circus figures, wire sculptures, and paintings of the celebrated black dancer Josephine Baker.

Next, Calder began experimenting with large-scale wire sculptures, many of which were three-dimensional. The pieces were witty and playful, made of wire and sheet metal, and full of spidery lines and curlicues. He gave them whimsical titles, such as *Blue Elephant with Red Ears*, *Crested Cow*, and *The Only, Only Bird. Umbrella Lamp*, which was one of his cleverest sculptures, portrayed a skinny pedestrian with a light bulb for a head holding a toy umbrella.

One of Calder's major influences was the artist Piet Mondrian, a Dutch abstractionist painter who drew austere pictures using straight black lines and white or primary-colored rectangles. "My entrance into the field of abstract art came about as a result of a visit to the studio of Piet Mondrian in Paris in 1930," Calder asserted in a 1951 essay that appeared in the *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*. Calder visited Mondrian's studio in Paris and expressed the wish that he could see all of Mondrian's paintings set in motion. Mondrian painted primarily in black and white, using the primary colors red, blue, and yellow for accent. Calder adopted this color scheme for his own work, and he protested when he was asked to use different colors.

In 1929 Calder presented his first solo show in Paris, displaying his wood and wire sculptures. Later, the exhibition moved on to New York and Berlin. During the 1930s, Calder often traveled between New York and Paris by ship. It was on one of these trips that he met Louisa James, whom he married in 1931. As his fame grew, Calder was accepted into a number of progressive art circles. He was invited to exhibit with Abstraction-Creation in Paris, a group dedicated to the promotion of nonfigurative art through exhibitions and the publication of an almanac, and his works were displayed at an event at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. For the first issue of *Abstraction-Creation, Art Non-Figuratif*, Calder prepared the following statement to accompany a reproduction of the sculpture *Little Universe*: "How does art come into being? Out of volumes, motion, spaces carved out within the surrounding space, the universe."

In *Little Universe*, Calder attempted for the first time to realize his concept of the cosmos in a three-dimensional form. The sculpture is made up of two circles of wire that intersect at right angles to form a sphere. A plastic form, which is thought to represent the universe, supports smaller solid spheres that could be asteroids or planetary bodies. Calder tried to portray his own vision of the shape and nature of the cosmos in this and other sculptures.

It was during the 1930s and early 1940s that Calder developed the concept of kinetic art by introducing actual movement rather than implied motion into his work. The idea was inspired partly by the relationships of planets, stars, and other celestial bodies. Calder's first stabiles were stationary constructions developed from his wire sculptures. He suspended little balls or free-form shapes from long wires, suggesting a model of the solar system.

In 1931 Calder began creating mobiles--moving sculptures that hung from ceilings or were suspended from large bases. Calder's first exhibition of these mobiles was held at the Galerie Vignon in Paris. In an effort to convey graceful, natural movement, he experimented with weight balances. When he tried to power his mobiles with small motors, he disliked their predictable, steady motion, and found that the motion created by air or wind currents in a room was more interesting. Calder's innovation was hailed as a major advancement in modern art; art critic Waverly Root is quoted in *Modern Arts Criticism* as stating that "Calder's mobiles may well be the beginning of four-dimensional sculpture." The unique combination of his engineering expertise and his spirit of creative exploration allowed Calder to modernize the art of sculpture.

Calder's first mobiles hung from the ceiling, but he quickly invented several standing varieties. *Sandy's Butterfly* has been described as a mobile-stabile, but art critic and author Bernice Rose, in an introduction to *A Salute to Alexander Calder*, wrote that Calder objected to this term because he felt that "anything that moves is a mobile."

By the end of the 1930s Calder had established a general form for his mobiles and stables. He often titled his works with the names of animals, including *Spider*, *Whale*, and *Black Beast*. His stables were broad, curved structures that were planted on the ground and often resembled huge spiders or dinosaurs.

Calder and his wife bought a farmhouse in Connecticut, and his studio there looked like a factory, with wires, poles, sheet metal, tools, and crates throughout. As interest in Calder's work grew, his sculptures were displayed all over the United States and Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. French author and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, in a catalogue for a 1946 Calder exhibition, stated, "When everything goes right a mobile is a piece of poetry that dances with the joys of life and surprises." When the Museum of Modern Art moved to its present location in New York City in 1939, Calder was commissioned to create a mobile for the stairway. In 1943 the Museum installed a large exhibition of Calder's work that included performances of *Circus* by the artist himself. The exhibition was a huge success, and commissions poured in from businesses, private citizens, and even governments all over the world. Demand was high for Calder's sculptures and for the posters, prints, rugs, and tapestries that he had designed. For the first time, Calder began to enjoy financial success, and his work was widely accepted.

Because of his new-found fame, he was commissioned to create large-scale sculptures for the Brussels World's Fair, UNESCO headquarters in Paris, and for what is now Kennedy International Airport in New York. Calder also made jewelry, designed sets and costumes for theatrical productions and ballets, illustrated books, and created toys for his children and grandchildren. He also drew and painted with oils. In the 1970s, Braniff Airlines commissioned Calder to paint some of their jets with his designs, and he decorated a racing car for the BMW motor company.

In 1953 the Calder family, which also included two daughters, bought a house near Tours in central France. This became their primary home and Calder's main studio, although they did keep the house in Connecticut. Calder's reputation continued to grow, and by the 1960s he was one of the world's most celebrated artists. His large sculptures appeared in public places. In 1962 Calder designed one of his most famous sculptures, a gigantic black stabile called *Teodelapio*, for the city of Spoleto, Italy. The piece is more than fifty-eight feet high, and traffic drives through it. Five years later, he produced *Man* for the World's Fair in Montreal, Canada. In 1974 he created the fifty-three-foot high *Flamingo* that stands in the Federal Center Plaza in Chicago, and that complements an adjacent skyscraper by Mies van der Rohe. When Katharine Kuh of *Artist's Voice* asked Calder in a 1960 interview if he liked being commissioned to create sculptures of such considerable size, he responded, "Yes--it's more exhilarating--and then one can think he's a big shot."

Calder's posters became very popular in the 1960s and 1970s, when bright colors and bold outlines fit the period perfectly. Calder contributed designs to the peace movement as well as to environmental causes and political campaigns. In 1966 Calder and his wife took a full-page ad in the *New York Times* to protest the war in Vietnam. Later, in 1972, he took out an ad to protest the Cambodian bombings.

During his lifetime, Calder received many prizes and honors, including the Gold Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1971) and the Grand Prix National from the French Ministry of Culture (1974). His last great work, a large mechanized mural for the Sears Tower in Chicago, was created two years before his death. In a 1972 essay that appeared in the book *Homage to Calder*, Gilbert Lascault wrote, "Calder's sculptures are perfect works, a mixture of delight and gravity, humor and construction. . . . These creatures who have been endowed

with an independent life of their own . . . make us turn, fascinated, to their creator." When Calder died in 1976, tributes poured in from all over the world. Martin Friedman, director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, stated in a eulogy for Calder that "He was one of the greatest form-givers America has ever produced. His art was characterized by wit, invention, and humanity. . . . His introduction of motion as a . . . component of art was an unprecedented event."

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## Further Readings

### BOOKS

- Arnason, H. H., *Calder: A Study of the Works*, Van Nostrand, 1966.
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- Caradente, Giovanni, *Calder: Mobiles and Stables*, New American Library, 1968.
- Ergas, G. Aimee, *Artists: From Michelangelo to Maya Lin*, Volume 1, UXL, 1995.
- Guerrero, Pedro E., *Calder at Home: The Joyous Environment of Alexander Calder*, Stewart, Tabori, & Chang, 1998.
- Hayes, Margaret Calder, *The Calders: A Family Memoir*, Paul S. Eriksson, 1977.
- Kuh, Katharine, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists*, Harper, 1962.
- Lascault, Gilbert, "Calder's Contradictions and Laughter," *Homage to Calder*, Tudor Publishing, 1972.
- Lipman, Jean, *Calder's Universe*, Running Press, 1976.
- Marchesseau, David, *The Intimate World of Alexander Calder*, translated by Eleanor Levieux and Barbara Shirey, Harry N. Adams, 1989.
- Marter, Joan M., *Calder*, Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- *Modern Arts Criticism*, Volume 2, Gale, 1992.
- Mulas, Ugo, and H. H. Arnason, *Calder*, Viking Press, 1971.
- Ragon, Michel, *Calder: Mobiles and Stables*, Methuen, 1967.
- Rose, Bernice, in an introduction to *A Salute to Alexander Calder*, Museum of Modern Art, 1969.
- Venezia, Mike, *Alexander Calder*, Children's Press, 1998.

### PERIODICALS

- *American Art Journal*, July, 1979, pp. 75-85.
- *Art in America*, Number 4, 1962, pp. 68-73; March-April, 1969, pp. 32-49; May-June, 1970, pp. 48-51.
- *Art News*, summer, 1973, pp. 54-58.
- *Arts Magazine*, October, 1978, pp. 108-113.
- *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, spring, 1951, pp. 8-9.

### OTHER

- Messer, Thomas, *Calder*, [New York City], 1964.
- Rose, Bernice, *A Salute to Calder*, [New York City], 1969.

- Sweeney, James Johnson, *Calder*, [New York City], 1951.

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